**The Deteriorating Situation of Children in Afghanistan**

**Position Paper**

**Background**

Afghanistan is one of the toughest places to be a child. Four decades of conflict have had wide-ranging social and economic repercussions, including **weaker institutions**, **poor public service delivery** and **limited opportunities for economic growth**. It is a place where a lack of timely investments has meant **mortality during childhood remains high** (under five mortality at 60 deaths per 1,000 live births against a 2030 SDG target of 25 deaths per 1,000 live births**[[1]](#footnote-1)**), **proper nutrition for growth to be ready for school is not ensured** (very high stunting rate at 38 per cent**[[2]](#footnote-2)**), **children do not have an adequate and appropriate nurturing environment and protection**, **fewer** **children attend school** (national net primary school attendance stands at only 44 per cent[[3]](#footnote-3)) **and are not prepared with relevant skills** to effectively contribute to the economic development of Afghanistan. Afghanistan ranks low on human capital development (169 out of 189 countries) with poor showing in gender equality, skilled labour force, health and education[[4]](#footnote-4). While some progress has been made in the past 20 years (for example, national gross primary school enrolment rose from about 21 per cent in 2000 to about 107 per cent in 2019[[5]](#footnote-5) while under five mortality declined from 129 to 60 deaths per 1000 live births withing the same period[[6]](#footnote-6) ), this progress has been uneven. It has benefitted mostly areas that are easier to reach, for example despite significant improvements in school attendance, net primary school attendance rate is less than 6 percent in the remote provinces of Urozgan and Helmand compared to over 70 per cent in Herat and Panjsher[[7]](#footnote-7).

Even before the current crisis, Afghanistan faced myriad challenges in terms of realising children’s and women’s rights, with children being subject to all **six grave violations affecting children in conflict**: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups; attacks on schools or hospitals; rape or other grave sexual violence; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children.

In 2020/2021, almost half of the population (18 million people) were in humanitarian need due to conflict, natural disasters, food insecurity, high cross-border mobility and the social, economic and health impacts of COVID-19. Poverty is also widespread, with almost one in two Afghans living below the national poverty line in 2019[[8]](#footnote-8).

**Deepening crisis for children**

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly with the recent political and socioeconomic developments. Essential services, such as health, education and water and sanitation are on the brink of collapse, due to lack of government funding as billions of assets and donor funding remains frozen leaving the de-facto authorities unable to sustain the operational budget including regular payment of civil servants. This is exacerbating the needs of an already vulnerable population.

More than half of the population, **24.4 million people, need humanitarian help, including 12.9 million children**. There are reports of **multiple disease outbreaks:** measles, acute watery diarrhoea, dengue, COVID-19[[9]](#footnote-9).

Without access to minimum life-saving services, Afghans will suffer catastrophic effects. Over 35 million people rely on basic primary health care services for life-saving care; **without sustained access to life-saving care, an estimated 212 children will die every day[[10]](#footnote-10).**

The **deteriorating situation has left 8.7 million people in emergency food insecurity** level 4[[11]](#footnote-11) . Undernutrition contributes to 45 per cent of child deaths in Afghanistan. Currently, **acute malnutrition is above emergency thresholds in 27 of 34 provinces** and rapidly worsening.

Drought has exacerbated WASH needs, **with 53 per cent of water points across three provinces drying up.** The breakdown of water services in urban settings has halved water availability and increased contamination from wastewater; **8 out of 10 Afghans drink bacteriologically contaminated water[[12]](#footnote-12)**.

Access to education has been a challenge due to cultural practices, displacement, inaccessibility, and lack of facilities keeping 4.2 million (60 per cent girls)[[13]](#footnote-13) out of school. **Without sustained access to education, 7.9 million more children risk missing out on critical education**. Prolonged school closures and absences often result in children, particularly girls, not returning to complete their education – with lasting impacts on children. Girls are yet to regain access to secondary school while tertiary institutions remain closed.

Social norms and harmful practices rooted in gender inequity are pervasive, with children and women being exposed to various extreme forms of violence and abusive behaviours, such as honour killings, child marriage, domestic abuse, and sexual violence.  **Years of conflict and the chaotic events post August 15 have led to families being displaced with many children on the move, some separated from their primary caregivers.**

These impacts have virtually obliterated coping mechanisms and given rise to child labour and early marriage. With the economy and many public service sectors verging on collapse due to non-payment of salaries and empty government coffers, **Afghanistan's people face an uncertain future**.

**What UNICEF is doing and current challenges**

UNICEF is scaling up humanitarian action in Afghanistan to reach:

* **Health**: **10.5 million** children under 5 with measles vaccination; **15.3** million children with access to primary health care through UNICEF supported facilities.
* **WASH**: **11.5 million people** with hand-washing behavior change programmes and sufficient and safe water for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene, **7.5 million people** with appropriate sanitation facilities as well as **9.2 million people** with critical WASH supplies.
* **Nutrition**: Over **1 million children** under 5 years with SAM treatment, over **2 million caregivers** of children with infant and young child feeding counselling and over **6.4 million children** under 5 with vitamin A supplementation.
* **Child protection**: over **4.2 million children** and caregivers with mental health and psychosocial support; **2.9 million child** survivors of grave violations with social and economic reintegration and life skills training support; over **1.8 million** unaccompanied and separated children with reunification with their primary caregivers or provided with alternative care services.
* **Education**: over **7.5 million children** with direct support for their education, including community-based education.
* **Social protection: 160,000 households** (1.2 million people, at least 600,000 children) with humanitarian cash transfers to enable them to meet their basic needs and overcome barriers to accessing basic services.

This will only be made possible with the generous contributions, such as from the Dutch Government. These needs are dire and our HAC for 2022 reflects an overall budget of about **US$ 2 billion to meet these needs**. Only 15 percent of this budget has, so far, been covered.

1. United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Afghanistan Heath Survey, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Afghanistan Income Expenditure and Labour Force Survey, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2020 HDR report [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Afghanistan Income Expenditure and Labour Force Survey, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 2022 Global Humanitarian Overview [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Based on current under-five mortality rate of 60 deaths per 1000 live births [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Afghanistan Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Afghanistan Income Expenditure and Labour Force Survey, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. National Statistics and Information Agency, 2020 Key Statistics Indicators [↑](#footnote-ref-13)